



RANTS & RAVES

As IT firms try to cash in on parental concerns about kids' safety by fitting tracking devices, Mel Croucher discovers an ID scheme that would make such gimmickry unnecessary

CACHING IN



**MEL CROUCHER
RANTS**

Following the unprecedented media frenzy over Madeleine McCann, a whole host of enterprises now target concerned parents with computerised products and services for the protection of their children. Heading the list is a new company called BladeRunner, whose publicity website features a blond infant, about three years old, staring balefully at the camera and dressed in a GPS Tracker Jacket.

It is a gaze we have seen endlessly echoed in recent months. The advertised garment keeps tabs on its wearer to within four metres anywhere in the world and it costs £250, plus £80 if you want the knife-proof Kevlar lining. There's also a satellite tracking charge of £10 a month.

Next up is ToddlerTag from Connect Software, whose bizarre slogan on its website reads: "This happen to you... Don't let." These specialists in RFID tagging offer "intelligent safety clothing" in the form of hats, bibs, dungarees and T-shirts, all designed to alert a carer if the infant toddles out of range,

as well as "nursery management software" at a modest fee of £495 upwards. Among the many others in the frame is Loc8tor Plus, whose nifty homing tags are effective up to a range of 600 feet and cost a mere £100.

FEAR FACTOR

My unease about all such products is the suspicion that certain manufacturers are cashing in on parental fear and paranoia without providing verifiable statistics on what the actual dangers are. My fear is that parents, babysitters and child-carers will abrogate their own responsibility for looking after kids

and hand it over to electronic devices. None of these devices can offer any real protection, and if they become detached from their wearers they can give a dangerous false sense of security that all is well when it is not.

Sprint has launched FamilyWatchdog Mobile, which allows parents to check out maps showing where registered sex offenders live and work, as well as download mugshots and conviction details. Concerned parents can also sign up to receive text alerts when an offender moves into their neighbourhood, although so far only territories in the US are covered. Sprint also uses the GPS capability of children's handsets to track them at a cost of less than a fiver a month.

Again, my unease is over a sales pitch that assumes the danger to children comes from strangers, monsters and registered sex offenders, when the sad reality is that it is a member of their own family who is most likely to inflict abuse, and there can be no



hardware or software at any price that can prevent this.

MISSING LINK

The excellent website at www.missingkids.co.uk is the most informative source in the land, and it combines data from the National Missing Persons Bureau, the International Centre for Missing & Exploited Children and UK regional police forces. If you accept the definition of a child as a person under the age of 16 and run a database search for the past 12 months, at the time of writing there were 19 children listed as missing. Of these, four went on the run from social services or the police, three absconded after domestic problems, three were abducted by a parent, one disappeared from a Scout jamboree and one went missing while on holiday abroad. There are seven others who cannot be found and they are all 14- and 15-year-olds, not infants.

These are the real statistics, and although each one is an

individual tragedy, they bear no relationship to the panic situation that some manufacturers would have us believe.

ID AYE

Perhaps the most disturbing case of child abduction is that of the Belgian murderer Marc Dutroux, who kidnapped six girls. In a remarkable response to the national outcry after his trial in 2004, Belgian local government began issuing smart cards to all children who are eligible from birth up to the age of 16 (under the UK's proposed ID card system, you'll have to be at least 16 to stump up for a card).

The children's cards cost their parents nothing, and their primary function is child protection. If a Belgian child gets lost or is involved in an accident or incident, the card carries data for instant contact with the parent or guardian, followed by other contact data for nursery, school, doctor and so on. For babies and toddlers who cannot communicate for themselves, it is a simple identity card, and for children over the age of six it also acts as an internet access card, allowing them to view child-safe material only. Brilliant. In fact, it is proving so popular that instead of feeling oppressed by the idea of ID cards, Belgian adults are demanding them, too.

Such is the far-sightedness of the Belgian scheme, it provides embedded digital signatures for online banking, tax returns, the reporting of crimes and access to any information held by the national and local authorities concerning the individual, so they can check the accuracy of their own data. The cost is €35 (£25) and the cards last for five years. The most intriguing thing of all about this wonderful child-safety system is that it has no biometric components whatsoever. According to the project manager at the Interior Ministry, Joachim Van Eyck, that is "too risky". He also says: "The first hours after a child's disappearance are the most important. If you find a child or find their card, our system allows parents and police to be notified right away."

Wouldn't it be great if the British government adopted the same system for our children, free of charge and free of fingerprints, retinal scans and all the other rubbish that will form part of our own Identity Tax? Then there would be no need for hard-pressed parents to fork out silly prices for electronic clothing after succumbing to moral blackmail and press hysteria.

EAR, EAR



**MEL CROUCHER
RAVES**

My friend Linnéa is a remarkable woman. She arrived in this country less than 10 years ago, alone, impoverished and without any medical experience, yet she is now a highly regarded physiotherapist. But this is not why I find her remarkable. No, what fascinates me is her flesh. In particular, I am intrigued by the nodules of flesh just above her twin lobulus auriculæ, with their succulent, pink protuberances and downy dusting of tiny golden hairs. To be absolutely specific, I am fascinated by the little hole between her tragus and anti-tragus, where she allowed me to insert my little finger in the interests of research for this article. In my opinion, my friend Linnéa has the most fascinating earholes I have ever seen. I believe they are evidence of human evolution for the electronic age.

Whereas most of our species have a U-shaped recess above the earlobe, Linnéa's lug-holes are elongated narrow slots. When a primitive being like me tries to wear a pair of iPod earphones, they always try to escape at the earliest opportunity. But when Linnéa listens to her iPod, those audio buds fit exactly into her ear slots and their wires are held in symbiosis, so that nothing short of clinical procedure can detach them. I would like to take this opportunity to share my thoughts with you about perfect designs for human beings who have not yet evolved like my friend Linnéa.

BIG KNOCKERS

Let me begin in the 15th century and discuss knockers. The most satisfying door-knockers ever designed were those big, brass, medieval jobbies in the shape of a human hand. They still survive on Spanish and Italian portals. When you grasp them, it feels as if you're shaking hands with the household itself and its entire history.

In the machine age, it always frustrated me when visiting public toilets that nobody could design a hand-drier that worked as well as a medieval door-knocker. Mechanical hand-driers were ugly and noisy, they had nozzles that blew air in the wrong direction and they had buttons that never worked, and if the electric motor ever did grudgingly kick in, it was a toss up between barbecued fingers or dysentery. All that changed a year ago, when James Dyson launched his marvellous Airblade, a magical

hand-drying robot that works as soon as you introduce your mits into its welcoming maw, and then emits a fraction of the noise and uses a fraction of the energy to take a fraction of the time to dry your hands perfectly. I love this design because it works for us Neanderthals. In fact, it is now the main reason I visit public toilets.

The most satisfying telephone ever designed is the 1956 model made at the Bell Telephone Works in Antwerp. It has the sort of speaker that envelops and kisses your ear, and the mouthpiece is so cupped and curved I defy anyone not to talk dirty when using it. Stupid, rectangular cell phones are for people with stupid, rectangular cell heads, and these are few and far between, except in Portsmouth. I can't wait for Dyson to come up with a mobile phone designed for people-shaped people or, better still, a Dyson Bluetooth earpiece.

The best Bluetooth I have encountered so far is manufactured by an Australian outfit called the BlueAnt-Z9, and it is actually shaped to weld to a human ear as opposed to that of an Alsatian dog. Unfortunately, I've lost mine, so I am stuck with the Bluetooth device that came free with my Motorola and looks like a contraceptive coil for a Dalek.

JUST A HUNCH

The most important ergonomic components that affect nearly all computer users are, of course, the computer keyboard and the mouse. I am happy to rave about good design that prevents the pain in the neck and shoulders that we experts call Strummer's Hunch, not to mention the evils of unnatural hand movements and wrist strain, similarly known as Tosser's Claw.

The misery of these afflictions can be avoided in two simple ways. First, any keyboard with built-in cursor control is preferable to the continual repetitive strain of switching from keyboard to mouse while typing. My personal favourite is the RollerMouse, which can be controlled with either thumb or any fingertip, and the cursor-control is placed where it makes sense, which is just below the spacebar of your keyboard. It ain't cheap at £125, but it works like a dream. Check out www.backinaction.co.uk for details.

The second way is to take a break from your keyboard every two hours, sashay around the room a while, and then go and lie down for some physiotherapy. My friend Linnéa is an expert in these matters, such is the nature of her success. Did I ever tell you about her remarkable nodules? **CS**